KUHN AND KOHELETH

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IN the forty-third *Beiheft* of the *ZATW* Gottfried Kuhn offers an interpretation of Ecclesiastes which deserves serious consideration, if for no other reason, because it is based neither upon conjectural emendations of the text nor upon that radical source-analysis which doth so easily beset us. Several emendations are proposed, but the main argument does not hinge upon them. Transposition of verses is resorted to more freely, yet not to an extent that can be called extreme.

Koheleth is here presented to us, not as a disillusioned old man who can see little good in this life and nothing beyond it, but as a man of deep faith, who enjoys the most intimate communion with God (p. 10). He frankly admits the inscrutability of God's ways, but his whole book leads up to and closes upon the note of the fear of the Lord (p. 53), and we are not left entirely in the dark as to the meaning of it all. The uniform hopelessness of all human endeavor, for the good and the wicked alike, has been divinely decreed (1 13; 3 19), and therefore is permanent (3 14) and good (3 11); its purpose is to test men (3 18), to show them that of themselves they are mere cattle, and so to place religion on the right basis by leaving no footing for that false religiosity which looks for earthly rewards (pp. 7—9).

This is not pessimism. Only when regarded as an end in itself is the world all vanity. To one who sees in it a manifestation of God's goodness it becomes a means of knowing Him (p. 10). The trouble which God has decreed for mankind

is surpassed (2 22–26) by His good pleasure toward those who receive their trials with submission (p. 17). The wise man has joy in the midst of trouble (pp. 16 f., 19); he prefers sorrow to laughter and the house of mourning to the house of feasting (7 1–6), because in the presence of death man's thoughts are transferred from things that are fleeting to the things that abide (pp. 33 ff.).

The right attitude to the world gives not only peace but also something to do which is not mere vanity (p. 11). Koheleth's counsel is not only to enjoy life but to do good (3 12), and to do it with your might (9 10); *to rejoice and to do good* means to do good gladly (p. 19). To be sure there is such a thing as excessive zeal (7 15–18), but wisdom (8 5 f.) observes time and judgment (p. 37).

Not only does Koheleth find a positive satisfaction and purpose in life; he even looks forward to the life to come. Passages which emphasize man's ignorance of any life beyond the grave, like those concerning the futility of worldly pursuits, are intended to show men their weakness and dependence. Since everything that God does is permanent and unalterable (3 14), the relationship with Himself which He grants to His elect must be eternal (pp. 10, 17, 20). The experience of God's goodness, Kuhn says (p. 12), *must* have brought Koheleth to the conclusion that the righteous have an unconditioned, unending reward. Many indications of this faith are discovered in the book.[1]

[1] The statement that God judges sin (3 17; 8 12 f.; 12 11), with the clear disclosure of the injustice of the present life, necessarily implies future retribution (p. 12). Furthermore, since God has made everything fair in its time and has set eternity in man's heart (3 11), making permanence the standard of all value (p. 18), the thought that everything has its appropriate time and all things go by cycles (3 1-8) suggests that the present time of trouble and injustice will be followed by a time of rest and justice, impossible as it is for man to know anything about this now (pp. 19 f.). The very question, *Who knows what is good for man in this futile life?* (6 12), points to another life beyond the present (p. 32), and the fact that God has made adversity along with prosperity (7 14) indicates that the trials of this existence may have significance for a time which now lies hidden from man's sight (p. 35). Again, when

The evidence can hardly be called convincing. Questionable exegesis and an uncritical use of doubtful passages and readings are apparent at every turn.[2] But Kuhn does not claim to have given convincing proof of this positive teaching in Ecclesiastes; indeed, according to his view, to look for explicit statements of these things would be to mistake entirely the purpose of the book. Koheleth knows more than he is willing to tell, and the reason for his reticence is inherent in the function indicated by his name. The feminine form points to Solomon as the mouthpiece of Wisdom (חכמה being feminine). But *Koheleth* represents only a partial revelation of Wisdom, having to do with *Kahal*, the open assembly, and therefore embracing only what is *under the sun*. The secrets of the spiritual world, which is not under the sun, belong only to a small circle of the faithful (pp. 1–5). In her true form, as she reveals herself to the elect, Wisdom is known by another name, *Shulamith*, the beloved bride of the Song of Songs (pp. 1f.).

Now this is rather confusing. If Shulamith is the true, esoteric wisdom, Solomon ought to be the believer or the community of believers, but Kuhn himself speaks of the Song of Songs as picturing the bond between the elect community and its King (p. 4), making Shulamith the true Israel and Solomon the Lord. As a matter of fact it is far from certain that the Song of Songs was allegorically interpreted in any sense in the time of Koheleth.

Quite apart from any connection with Shulamith, however, is it likely that Koholeth knew a wisdom not of this world

Koheleth speaks of *the time wherein one man hath power over another* (8 9), the echo of 3 1-8 suggests a future time when God alone will rule, thus giving "an intimation of the Messianic time" (p. 43). And if death comes alike to the wise and the foolish, the good and the wicked (9 1-3), then the good man's hope (9 4) cannot end with death. Even in the symbols of the last chapter Kuhn discerns what we may call intimations of immortality from old age (p. 52).

[2] In 3 17 the word שם is taken as pointing to the other world. The חמה לחם at the end of the next verse is understood to mean *they of themselves*. In 8 23 Kuhn holds that לראשׁה is emphatic, the point being that the hereafter can be known only by faith, not by sight. Similar explanations are given in other passages.

which he could speak among them that were perfect? Kuhn's view reminds us of the reason given in the Synoptic gospels (Mk. 4 10–12 and parallels) for Jesus' use of parables. There may have been some kind of esoteric wisdom among the Jews in Koheleth's time,[3] but if he refers to it at all, he does not give it a very hearty recommendation. If his book is indeed the veiled expression of a mystery, it is strange that for so many centuries Biblical scholars have seen and not perceived and have heard and not understood. Many indeed have been the prophets and righteous men who have not seen what Kuhn has seen.

Of course Kuhn's interpretation has not all been made, as we say, out of his own head. Just how original it is cannot be judged without a very wide knowledge of the literature on Ecclesiastes, for Kuhn does not give specific references to other commentators. Older scholars, who can remember the now discarded theories of an earlier generation, may recognize many ideas which seem quite new to one acquainted only with the more recent commentaries. Certainly there is no novelty in the attempt to make Koheleth's condemnation of this world an intimation of the contrast between it and the world to come. This much, at least, of Kuhn's view is found already in the Targum. So far as I am aware, however, the idea that Koheleth was prevented from disclosing the deeper wisdom by his function as teacher of the *Kahal* is a new one, and such

[3] The Rabbinic use of the word mystery (מסטירין), of course, is much later, and the Greek word suggests that the idea was imported; furthermore it is not an inner circle that is spoken of as possessing the mystery, but Israel as against the nations, or the righteous against the ungodly. Greek conceptions, however, were known in Israel in Koheleth's day. There was also a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism, the Essenes are said to have had esoteric doctrines, and the medieval Cabala may have been rooted in very ancient soil. It is a curious fact that in the Cabala an expression from Ecclesiastes was used to designate the elect: they were known as the יודעי חן (cp. Eccl. 9 11), the word חן being taken as an anagram for the חכמה נסתרה. But in Ecclesiastes we have יודעים, not יודעי, and חן is not the object but the subject; moreover Koheleth lists the יודעים among those who have no monopoly or certainty of success in life but are as dependent as other men upon *time and chance*.

seems to be Kuhn's own feeling, for at the very beginning of his discussion he gives his interpretation of the name *Koheleth* as the foundation of his whole exposition.

What could have suggested such a theory? Apparently it was inspired by the desire to make Koheleth as nearly as possible a Christian saint. More and more, as we follow Kuhn's thought, the suspicion creeps over us that his primary interest is not exposition but edification.

If it were so, it were a grievous fault.

Edification and scholarship need not be mutually exclusive, to be sure, but we do not expect the homiletic interest to dominate a *Beiheft* of the *ZATW*. Undoubtedly Kuhn has made a thorough study of the book. Evidences of the most minute research are apparent on every page, and at the end we find not only references to N. T. passages which Kuhn regards as dependent upon Ecclesiastes, but also more than two pages giving explanations and emendations of various readings in the LXX, Peschitta, and Targum. Any future commentator ought to consider on its own merits each of Kuhn's emendations and transpositions. The central argument, however, has been too much controlled by the practical, pastoral motive, and Kuhn seems to have forgotten that a bad example may be as profitable as a good one.

Without attempting a more detailed criticism of Kuhn's position, let me state briefly what seems to me to be the true meaning of Ecclesiastes. As regards the form of the book I should say that it may have originated, like some of the prophetic books, in a disciple's notes of his master's sayings. There may be some dislocation, and there may also be some interpolation, but both of these hypotheses have been worked for more than they are worth. Modern commentators retain many verses which have no apparent relation to the main theme of the book and delete passages for whose interpolation we can imagine no satisfactory reason.[4] If we suppose that a

[4] It is said, of course, that all wise sayings came to be attributed to Solomon and so might be copied into a book supposed to have been written by him; but why then should they have been inserted all

devoted follower—an ancient Boswell, if you please—has from time to time written down notes of his teacher's discourses on various themes, we can readily understand the lack of orderly arrangement, the frequent recurrence of similar ideas, and the presence here and there of epigrammatic remarks having no direct connection with what precedes or what follows them. The words, *says Koheleth* (1 2; 7 27; 12 8), and the concluding tribute to Koheleth and summary of the practical implications of his teaching (12 9–14) may be attributed to the same hand. A certain degree of inconsistency may be explained by the student's failure to understand his teacher or to agree with him fully, just as apparent discrepancies in the teaching of Jesus are laid to the account of those who reported his sayings. We must not forget, however, that this book did not grow out of an academic investigation but out of a soul's experience in the stress of life, and consequently can be understood only from the psychological point of view, which does not expect logical consistency.

Koheleth is neither a Gnostic nor a philosopher, but a true Hebrew sage. His interest, his point of view, his approach to the questions he discusses are distinctly those of the wise men of Israel. But his teaching has received a distinctly individual coloring from his own experience and temperament. His words reveal a sensitive soul, sensitive alike to the joys of life and to its disheartening and inexplicable disappointments. There is much that is very youthful in his outlook and temperament. He is not a cynic. He does not look with supercilious scorn upon the folly of his fellow-men: he feels as they do. He wants to be happy and feels that he ought to be happy, but finds it very hard in such a world as this, and like an impulsive child he rebels at finding his exuberance curbed and thwarted on every hand. He cannot take the futility of human endeavor with philosophic calm: it is *a sore evil.*[5] Not only is he sensitive to personal joys and pains; he feels keenly the wrongs

through the book at points where they have no connection with the context?

[5] Eccl. 6 12, 15.

of the social order in which he lives. Oppression,[6] bribery,[7] misgovernment,[8] and the inequitable distribution of life's blessings[9] hurt him as much as does the frustration of his own desires.

But he is no reformer. He has nothing of the flaming indignation of an Amos, nothing of the crusading spirit. He is not tough-minded. He cannot even blame corrupt officials: it is the system that is at fault, and the individual is helpless.[10] It has always been so and always will be.[11] The wise man knows that there is no use being *too* righteous.[12] Even a man's own destiny is beyond his control. Righteousness cannot prevent poverty, old age, and death.[13]

Unable to find satisfaction in hopeless pursuits, Koheleth racks his brain to find why things are as they are.[14] The world seems so attractive! Youth is sweet,[15] the light of the sun is pleasant,[16] friendship is good;[17] yes, wisdom is better than folly, and virtue is better than vice[18]—they *must* be so! Why then does everything go wrong? It is a dark mystery. God has put ignorance in man's heart; he cannot see what is to come of it all.[19] Searching for hidden causes and purposes is one of the most futile of all life's futilities.[20] But one thing seems clear: the trouble is largely in man himself. God made men upright, but they have not been satisfied with what He has given them.[21] If they would avoid disappointment, they must get rid of their inordinate desires.[22]

The resemblance between Koheleth's thought and some of the doctrines of both Stoicism and Epicureanism has often been pointed out. His spiritual kinship with Gotama Buddha also has not been unnoticed. I do not know whether any scholar has found traces of Taoism in Ecclesiastes, but there is a very real affinity between Koheleth and Lao-tze. The significance of these similarities lies in their testimony to the universal character of Koheleth's experience. As suggestive

[6] 4 1; 7 7. [7] 7 7. [8] 3 16; 8 11; 10 5.
[9] 7 15; 8 14. [10] 5 7; 10 20. [11] 1 15; 3 14 f.; 7 13.
[12] 7 16. [13] 2 15; 6 6; 9 2 f. [14] 7 25. [15] 11 9.
[16] 11 7. [17] 4 9-12. [18] 2 13. [19] 3 11.
[20] 7 23-25; 8 16 f. [21] 7 29. [22] 2 2-5; 4 6.

as any of them is the picture of the emperor Diocletian, peacefully enjoying his little cabbage-patch and refusing to be drawn back into the mad whirlpool of politics and war.

One other parallel may be mentioned. Koheleth would agree with Socrates and J. S. Mill that it is better to be a man dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. To him, as to the ancient Egyptian who wrote the *Dialogue of a Misanthrope with his own Soul,* the pursuit of pleasure is as unsatisfying as the pursuit of wealth. Even when he tries wine, his wisdom is still with him[23]—he cannot for the life of him just tear loose and step on the gas! The fact that he cannot only shows his utter sincerity. His nature is too fine to be satisfied with anything that is coarse. Whether or not he can see what advantage the wise man has over the fool, wisdom is preferable to folly. This becomes doubly significant when we recall that for his perception of the inequity of this life he had as compensation neither the hope of immortality nor that other hope which takes its place for many people today, the hope of social progress.

If we ask what definite religious faith he had, we must at least admit that there is something akin to faith in this loyalty to wisdom even when he can see no advantage in it. But we must give him credit for more than that. He was reverent, sincerely reverent.[24] Furthermore, he never lost his ingrained feeling that a man could and ought to be happy. The joys of youth and friendship, of home and garden, are fleeting, but after all they are real, and in spite of all the sorrow in the world we need not hesitate to enjoy them while they last: they are God's gifts.[25] Koheleth has not a satisfying philosophy of life. He has very little theology. He does have, however, something which in its intense earnestness and its stedfast allegiance to both reason and conscience, both mind and heart, well deserves to be called faith.

[23] 2 2a.

[24] 5 1-6. Koheleth always speaks reverently of God, and there is no injustice ascribed to Him as in Job; His ways and purposes are dark but not evil.

[25] 2 24; 3 13; 5 18 f.; 8 15; 9 7.